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1946 ALCATRAZ ESCAPE ATTEMPT LED BY LIBRARY ORDERLY FROM KENTUCKY

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A few years ago, several Kentucky librarians returned from an American Library Association Conference in San Francisco; and brought with them tales of an inmate librarian from Kentucky who had led an escape attempt at the Alcatraz Prison. The story seemed far-fetched, and therefore, it was considered a Wild West fable devised for the entertainment of a few gullible librarians. If a Kentucky librarian had done such a thing, then all Kentucky librarians would already know of the story. Recently the topic came up again and a bit of research revealed that there was quite a bit of truth to the story, which is referred to as the Battle of Alcatraz.

Craig Glassner, Supervisory Park Ranger at Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, confirmed that the inmate's name was Bernard Paul Coy. Bernard had been a library orderly at the Prison, and he was originally from Louisville, Kentucky. He was an accomplished painter and decorator, and he was also an expert marksman with a rifle. Bernard had been transferred from the Atlanta Federal Prison to Alcatraz because he was a problem inmate. He had been sentenced to 26 years at the Atlanta prison for crimes he had committed in Kentucky.

Margaret Scites and other employees of the Nelson County Public Library (Kentucky) were able to provide the date of one of the crimes - the armed robbery of the Bank of New Haven, Kentucky, on March 25, 1937. The finer details of this story were gathered from microfilmed copies of newspapers in the University of Kentucky Library collection. It seems that Bernard and his 23-year-old cousin, Delbert Lee Stiles, also from Louisville, entered the Bank of New Haven about 11:30 am. One of them was wearing a raincoat, which concealed a sawed-off 20-gauge shotgun; the other was brandishing a pistol.

Assistant cashier Earl Kirkpatrick was the only person on duty because his co-worker, J. Ekro Rapiet, had gone home for lunch. The robbers forced Kirkpatrick into the opened bank vault. The money was removed and Kirkpatrick was told to remain in the vault, which the robbers did not lock. No one was injured during the holdup and the thieves got away with \$2,175. Kirkpatrick did not remain in the vault; he had been robbed five years earlier during the lunch hour, on October 22, 1931. He exited the vault in time to witness one of the robbers kicking out the back window of the getaway car and wielding the sawed-off shotgun to ward off any possible followers. Kirkpatrick provided this information and a description of the robbers to the police.

Bernard and Delbert had made their getaway in a stolen 1935 Ford model V-8 gray coach. The car was ditched in the Rolling Fork River near Bardstown, Kentucky. The two men then hid in a cave near the river, and a few days later they left the state. Their hideout had been near the home of Jesse Stiles who lived with his parents in Gleanings, Kentucky in Larue County. Jesse Stiles was the 22-year-old uncle of Delbert Stiles. Jesse had no part in the bank robbery, but he had provided food to the robbers and he had agreed to hide some of the money.

Delbert Stiles was captured on April 1, 1937 in Indianapolis, Indiana. He had been arrested before on disorderly conduct and vagrancy charges. On April Fools' Day of 1937, Delbert once again had caused a public disturbance, this time in a movie theatre in Indianapolis. The police were called and when they arrived Delbert tried to get away by jumping into a taxicab. When he was taken from the cab, police found a gun on the cab floor. Delbert was also carrying \$136. The police learned that Delbert had already spent some of the bank money to buy a new suit of clothes and three new pairs of shoes. He had asked his

uncle, Jesse Stiles, to hide \$256. Because Jesse had assisted the robbers, he was arrested at his home in Kentucky. Police later found the car and the cave hideout where the robbers had left \$110, a radio, and the sawed-off shotgun.

As the police gathered more evidence, Delbert and Bernard were also identified as accomplices in the March 8, 1937, holdup of the Meyers' Cut Rate Liquor Store in Louisville, Kentucky. Richard Samuel Coy, Bernard's brother, was the third robber in the liquor store holdup. The three men had taken \$127 from the store clerk, and they had given the storeowner, T. B. Meyers, a pint of whiskey because they mistakenly thought that he was a customer in the store. The storeowner later identified the three men from police photographs.

The FBI captured Bernard Paul Coy, 37 years old, on April 19, 1937 in Cashton, Wisconsin. His brother Samuel was picked up the same day in Peoria, Illinois. Both men were brought back to Louisville where they were jailed and charges were filed against them. Bernard would spend the rest of his life in prison. He had already spent most of the previous eleven years locked up. In 1935 he had received a two-year sentence for burglary in Frankfort, Kentucky. In 1930 he had received a five-year sentence for burglary in Waupun, Wisconsin. In 1926 he had been arrested for burglary in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and received a dishonorable discharge from the Army and a three-year sentence in the penitentiary. Bernard had been 16 years old when he joined the Army and served with distinction during WWI. He later re-enlisted, then got married and deserted the Army.

On June 3, 1937, a Federal Court jury found Bernard Paul Coy and Delbert Lee Stiles guilty on three counts of an indictment in the robbery of the Bank of New Haven. It was reported in the *Kentucky Standard* (Bardstown, Kentucky), "A total of \$797.75 of the loot was recovered by G-men and turned over to the bank." The cousins, Bernard and Delbert, were given a combined total of 37 years in prison for the bank robbery: Bernard 22 years and Delbert 15. For the liquor store robbery, both men were given an additional one-year and a day. For the other charges involving interstate transportation and concealment of a stolen automobile each was given another three years.

Bernard was sent to the Atlanta Prison to serve a total of 26 years. Delbert was sent to

the Federal Reformatory at El Reno, Oklahoma to serve a total of 19 years. Jesse Wilbur Stiles, Delbert's uncle, was found guilty on a conspiracy count and he was sentenced to two years at the Kentucky State Reformatory. Richard Samuel Coy, Bernard's brother, was sentenced to a five-year prison term for the liquor store robbery, plus another 2 years involving interstate transportation and the stolen automobile.

Bernard was a troublesome inmate in Atlanta, and was therefore transferred to Alcatraz Prison in California the latter part of 1937. During his 9-year stay at Alcatraz, he was a model prisoner, for the most part. According to author, Ernest B. Lageson, Bernard read extensively and painted from memory many pictures of the hills and valleys of western Kentucky. He also became an accomplished "cell-house lawyer" for some of the other inmates.¹ Bernard was not seeking to become a librarian, but rather he asked for the job of library orderly and received it because of his good behavior. The librarians were inmates Ed Cook and Dub Baker. The library had over 15,000 volumes and every inmate was given a list of the titles and authors.

Bernard's job was to distribute library materials to all of the prisoners; this allowed him to move more freely about in the prison and become familiar with the day to day routine of the guards and the prisoners. With this information, Bernard put together a meticulous escape plan that had come together nicely, except for one piece – how would he get to the guns.

Access to the gun gallery would mean that Bernard would have to squeeze his slender body between the prison bars that measured 5 inches wide. He would need to lose some weight and he would also need to spread the bars a few inches more in order for him to get through them successfully. A deal was made and inmate plumber, Ed Mrozik, agreed to fashion a bar spreader in exchange for extra food at mealtime. Other bribes were used to actually get the bar spreader into Bernard's hands. Bernard paid bribes with choice library books, magazines, and other materials, as well as hand rolled cigarettes and home-brew prepared by the kitchen crew.

On May 2, 1946, Bernard put his plan into action. He had finished distributing the library materials and was let out of his cell for his second job, cleaning the floors. Bernard had memorized the guards' routines and he

knew which keys were needed in order for his plan to work. He and a fellow inmate, Marvin Hubbard, overtook one of the guards and removed his key ring. The inmates did not know that the guard had the key to the outside door, key 107, in his pocket.

For that moment, getting the guns was the primary focus. Bernard undressed and spread industrial grease on his body; he scaled the bars leading to the gun gallery, and used the bar spreader to open a space between the bars a couple more inches. He was able to pass through the opened space and gain access to the gun gallery.

The escape plan was on schedule and Joseph Cretzer, Sam Shockley, Clarence Carnes, and Buddy Thompson joined Bernard and Marvin. Ten officers were captured and locked in a cell. Things were going as planned until the inmates realized that they did not have key 107. They were desperate; they tried to unlock the outside door using all of the keys they had gathered, thereby ruining the lock. The escape attempt was soon brought to the attention of the prison administration and the alarm was sounded. Warden James A. Johnston alerted the Coast Guard, the Army, the Navy, the Marines, the San Francisco Police Department, the Bureau of Prisons, and all prison officers on and around the island. There was not going to be an escape.

Bernard began shooting outside the windows at the officers in the towers. Inmate Joseph Cretzer shot the officers that had been captured inside the prison. Officers stationed on

the prison grounds fired shots into the cell house. The inmates eventually found key 107, but it was useless; the door lock was ruined. Inmates Shockley, Carnes, and Thompson decided that there was no hope and went back to their cells. A group of officers entered the prison and rescued their comrades, who were being held in a cell not far from the prison library. The warden took stock of the situation – one officer had been killed, another had died at the hospital, fourteen were wounded, and three inmates (Bernard, Marvin, and Joseph Cretzer) refused to surrender.

Help was sought from the U. S. Marines. The cell house was attacked with grenades, gas, machine guns, and rifles. The bazookas were also brought in, but they were thought to be too dangerous. The Marines had also brought along flamethrowers. The inmates hid in a utility corridor, but it offered little defense against more than a day of military attack and the close gunfire that was later aimed into their hiding place. All three inmates died.

Co-conspirators Thompson and Shockley were sentenced for their roles in the escape attempt and both were executed in the gas chamber at San Quentin, on December 3, 1946. Carnes, the youngest inmate at Alcatraz, was given another life sentence. He remained in prison until 1974 and he died of AIDS in 1988. Family members never claimed Bernard Paul Coy's body and he was buried in San Francisco. So ends the story of the library orderly from Kentucky who led a major revolt at the Alcatraz prison.

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